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ABSTRACT

A discussion of English-as-a-Second-Language teaching techniques and approaches for young children focuses on principles found to contribute to successful program development. First, characteristics of successful language immersion programs are outlined: parental involvement and support; students who are members of a majority group; positive attitudes toward the target language and culture; and optional participation. Additional principles of second language program design are then enumerated, including: a natural setting in which language can be used in a meaningful way; positive attitudes about the first language and culture; minimal code-switching; supportive home and school environments and adequate home language development; and attainment of a threshold level of linguistic competence in both languages. This implies that teachers provide broad exposure to the target language but allow response in the first language, emphasize spoken language in the early grades, allow experimentation with language, and include parents in language program planning and implementation. Teaching techniques should promote substantial student initiation of communication, and may incorporate role-playing and dramatization, literature, theme-based lessons and problem-solving, and discovery. Contains 13 references. (MSE)

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Teaching English As A Second Language: How Young Children Learn

by

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TEACHING ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE: hOW YOUNG CHILDREN LEARN

DR. MERILEE ROSBERG

ABSTRACT

Learning a second or third language at any age can be a difficult experience expecially in most classroom settings. Certain characteristics are present in most successful language immersion programs. These characteristics are examined as well as several principles of learning that need to be considered.

Different teaching approaches are discussed with the conclusion that certain approaches such as the discovery method may work best with young children. Research will probably prove no single method is consistently better than another when diverse groups are evaluated.

TEACHING ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE: HOW YOUNG CHILDREN LEARN

DR. MERILEE ROSBERG

When helping young children to learn a language, it is important to realize that culture comes before language as a priority (Byram, Morgan and Colleagues, 1994). Cultural content creates the motivation to learn a foreign language. This means that language courses must be meaningful and relevant. Children learn a language because of a need to communicate. There must be a reason for them to learn a foreign language.

"For a child to acquire a second language requires a great deal of trial-and-error, creative hypothesis-testing, and awkward experimentation. Many children do not succeed. Especially in the classroom context, second language learning is a difficult and frustrating experience..." (McLaughlin, 1984).

"Success in acquiring a second language depends on the ability and motivation of the subjects rather than on the teaching method used..." (Siguan and Mackey, 1987). This does not mean that the teacher is not important, but that the teacher must find meaningful ways to motivate the students. Children learn languages by using them in natural communications. They need many opportunities to use language in meaningful social interactions. They must be provided with a stimulating and diverse linguistic environment where they can hear native speakers and interact at their own level.

Swain and Lapkin (1982) list four characteristics that contribute to a successful language immersion programme. They are: (1) Parental involvement and support of the programme.

(2) Students are members of a majority group. (3) Positive attitudes toward the language and culture of the target language. (4) The programme is optional. When these factors are present, the programme has a high liklihood of success.

In Malaysia, the first three characteristics are probably possible to achieve in the governmental school system. The optional nature of the language programme is something that might be considered. Most families would probably choose to have their child learn English.

Besides the above characteristics there are several principles of learning that should be considered when teaching children a second language. Research has shown that the following principles seem to hold true in setting up a successful programme for teaching languages (Cummins and Swain, 1986; Flores and Riley, 1982; Saville-Troike and Muriel, 1981; and Siguan and Mackey, 1987).

1) Young children learn best in a natural setting where they can use language in a meaningful way. In order to facilitate this, teachers should plan the environment so that children feel free to interact with others and to take risks in using language.

2) Young children must feel positive about their own language and culture if they are to successfully add an additional language. This will allow them to maintain a healthy balance between their mother tongue and the additional language. They must also feel that there is a practical need to learn another language. If there is not an apparent need, the teacher must find a way to

motivate the students.

3) Young children will learn languages best in an environment where the languages are clearly separated by persons. There should not be a great deal of code-switching. It is better for a teacher to use one language and to paraphrase a sentence if a child doesn't understand rather than to switch to another language. It's all right for the child to respond in his/her first language, but the teacher should respond in the language to be learned.

4) The development of a balanced bilingual experience is best fostered when school and home provide a supportive environment. Both teachers and parents need to view the second language as a positive addition. It is also best to ensure that the child's home language is adequately developed before worrying about progress in the second language.

5) Lastly, Cummins and Swain state that "Children need to attain a threshold level of linguistic competence in their first and second languages in order to avoid cognitive disadvantages and to allow the potentially beneficial aspects of becoming bilingual to influence cognitive functioning" (1986, p.6)

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE TEACHER

These principles have several implications for the teacher. If children learn best in a programme where they are immersed in language, the teacher must provide children with large blocks of time where they can both hear the second language and have many opportunities to practice it. Children need to hear and interact

with native speakers on a regular basis, but they should be free to respond in their first language. Since learning a foreign language is difficult and can be frustrating, teachers should be patient and supportive.

In the primary school emphasis should be on the spoken language. Conversation is the primary process in the development of language for young children (McLaughlin, 1984). Formal learning of rules will not benefit the young child who is attempting to learn another language (Krashen, 1982). The teacher interacts with the children and provides a model for using language. Children are given opportunities to use language in meaningful ways. Conversation should be based on the experiences and interests of the children (Swain and Lapkin, 1982).

Children should be immersed in the target language. The teacher should provide an environment where children feel comfortable to experiment with language. All communication by the teacher should be in the target language, but when children are first learning the language they should be allowed to respond in their first language. When learning any language there is a "silent" period when the learner absorbs the material. The learner should be free to listen and to play around with words.

Another important implication is to include parents in planning and implementing the foreign language programme. Teachers and administrators should meet with parents/caretakers to discuss the overall goals and objectives of the programme.

Parents may have relevant suggestions and ideas regarding goals and implementation. If parents are aware of programme goals, they can support them at home. Parents can also be encouraged to be positive about the value of the child's first language as well as the language being targeted.

TEACHING APPROACHES

In many classrooms teachers monopolize the talk. Children respond rather than initiating the conversation and there is very little sustained conversation (Edwards, 1983). It's important to use natural language. One programme that builds on children's natural language is "The Language Experience Approach." Children talk about everyday experiences and the teacher writes down their comments. Individually or in small groups, the children dictate a story based on their experience. After a small group cooking activity, children may dictate the steps in the cooking process. The teacher writes down the ideas expressed by the children. Then the teacher and children read the sentences together as the teacher points to the words. These stories can be printed and taken home by the children to read to their parents. This provides a positive linkage between home and school.

Role play and dramatisation provide an enjoyable way to build language skills. Teachers should provide an area in the classroom with simple props, books, and puppets where children can use language to share ideas and stories. In the beginning the teacher or another adult will need to model role playing situations. The adult should take his/her cues from the

children, but ideas can be expanded on and new vocabulary introduced. For example, if the children are pretending to run a grocery store, the teacher can provide empty grocery containers, bags for groceries, a toy cash register, and play money. The teacher can take the role of the grocer and ask if the customer wants to buy some rice, or fish, or bread. The adult provides some of the vocabulary but gradually lets the students take over the operation of the store.

Yet another way to make language meaningful is to use a "Literature-based Curriculum". The teacher and children read children's stories and informational books in the second language. Discussion and writing can revolve around selected books. Teachers need to carefully choose books that will be relevant and interesting to the students. In the beginning most books should be oriented around things that are familiar to the child such as family, pets, going shopping, etc. Gradually it is important to include books about the culture and folklore. In order to really learn another language, one needs to have a basic understanding about the people who speak this language.

Books about other cultures are becoming more readily available for young children. Teachers need to carefully examine books, however, to ensure that they do not provide a stereotypical view of the culture being studied. Illustrations in children's books should also be considered. They should supplement the text and present a realistic view of the people. Reading books about other cultures will also expand vocabulary

and introduces new concepts to discuss.

Yawkey and Prewitt-Diaz (1990) expand on this idea. They state that programme planning based on themes and problem solving is most appropriate because it provides an integrated approach with both teacher and student planned activities. This integration in a social context maximizes language growth in both the first and second language. Children engage in problem solving and discovery.

There are three different approaches to the discovery method. (1) In free discovery, the child chooses the materials and experiments with them. (2) In prompted discovery, the teacher provides the specific materials but children are free to use them as they wish. (3) In directed discovery, the teacher guides the students in the use of the materials by asking questions and making suggestions. All of these approaches can be used at different times depending on individual needs and teacher objectives. As children engage in problem solving, they use language with each other and the teacher in practical ways.

If children want to learn more about frogs, the teacher may supply books, pictures, and other reference materials. The children may decide that they want to learn about the life cycle of the frog. They can discuss this with the teacher and determine what they need to do to continue this project. The teacher may suggest that she can supply an acquarium with tadpoles, or the teacher and children may go to a creek to try to catch tadpoles. Whatever is decided, there should be a great

deal of conversation and debate.

After obtaining tadpoles, the children can make observations, discuss them, and record what they see. In this approach, children learn from each other and through actual experiences. Vocabulary is increased and new concepts are learned.

CONCLUSIONS

Flores and Riley (1982) suggest that we need to do more research on the effectiveness of different methods for teaching languages, but they believe that no single method will be consistently found to be better than another when diverse groups are evaluated. Some methods may prove to be more effective for particular cultural settings. We need to continue to study and determine who learns best under what conditions.

Many of the same methods and strategies used to teach a first language have proved to be effective in learning another language. Bain et al. (1992) discuss classroom approaches to knowledge about language. Teachers believe that language awareness should be a part of every language session. Children use language in practical ways and also examine the language. When children become aware of language, they will begin to examine their new language in relation to their first language. Similarities and differences can be discussed, and children can build on this knowledge. If children are to be successful in learning any language, they must be given opportunities to use it and they must see language as a useful skill to have.

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